

## **A comparative analysis of Asian values and *Islam Hadhari* in Malaysia\***

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the principles of Asian values, propagated by Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and *Islam Hadhari* by his successor Abdullah Badawi. The author argues that both concepts are similar in theory and practice except that *Islam Hadhari* stresses more on Islam and Malay agenda. In fact, *Islam Hadhari* is ironically a concept created by Mahathir himself to counter the idea of Islamic State from the Islamic party, PAS. Therefore, even after retiring from the government, Mahathir's agenda of Asian values is still being practiced. This paper presents the debates between scholars in explaining the ideas and philosophies behind those two concepts in Malaysia's politic.

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### **Introduction**

According to Robert S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy (1999: 168), 'Mahathirism is not a guide to Mahathir's thoughts or actions. Rather, Mahathir's thoughts and actions are a guide to constructing Mahathirism. Mahathirism is an exercise in allocating thoughts into logical categories with the aim of achieving intellectual satisfaction and understanding'. As an advocate of 'Asian values', Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister who ruled Malaysia from 1981 to 2003, explained that the Malaysian perspective of 'Asian values' is based on Malay-Islamic culture and should be protected against absorption by Western values. He urged the three most basic elements of 'Malayness' – feudalism, Islam, and *adat* (traditional customs) as he saw it in his book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), should all be classed as features to be merely accepted as realities and perhaps adapted to modern needs (Barr, 2002: 42). Mahathir (Mahathir and Ishihara, 1995: 71-86) rejected universalism or the Western liberal notion of human rights which, he believed, can corrupt Malaysian culture and religious beliefs. Concerned about the influence of Western individualism, and the future of Asian values and traditions, Mahathir accepted the idea of cultural relativism and launched the 'Look East' policy in 1982 as a broader campaign against 'Western values'. Mahathir told the 1982 United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) General Assembly to 'Look East' to emulate the diligence found there and 'to rid ourselves of the Western values that we have absorbed' (Khoo, 1995: 69).

Errol P. Mendes (1994: 3) labels the Malaysian version of Asian values as 'The Mahathir Model' to differentiate it from other types of Asian values such as Singaporean schools that emphasises on Confucianism and China Model on the combination of Chinese-Nationalist-Communist values. 'The Mahathir Model' is basically influenced by Malay-Islamic values. As Alan Dupont points out, Mahathir had the clarion call for Asian values:

“...despite the fact that the Islamic ethos of his country differs markedly from the Neo-Confucianism of Singapore and other Sino-centred states in East Asia. However, he (Mahathir) reconciles this apparent contradiction by subsuming Malaysia’s distinctive national character in broader obeisance to Asian Values.” (Dupont, 1996: 14)

This model of Asian values has also helped to support the government agenda. Stability and enforced social cohesion in a heterogeneous society has become internalised as a fundamental core Asian values (Mendes, 1994). Asian leaders, such as Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, also introduced the concept of Asian values in response to the global democratisation, booming economy and political stability of the 1990s, before the currency crisis of 1997 had shocked Asian countries (Naisbitt, 1997: 51-85, Inoguchi and Newman, 1997: 1-2). The main elements of ‘The Mahathir Model’ are strong authority, prioritising the community over the individual, and a strong family-based society. The distinctive feature of ‘the Mahathir Model’ is that it draws upon the experience of the Western world in order to evaluate the state and society in the light of modernity. Its main critique is based upon empirical and cultural grounds. Mahathirism or ‘the Mahathir Model’ is clearly a reaction to the debate between two main theories of human rights, universalism and cultural relativism, and it could also be expanded into these three arguments: anti-western imperialism, strong government and protecting community.

#### **Abdullah’s *Islam hadhari***

Mahathir’s successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, introduced a concept or a list of values called ‘*Islam Hadhari*’ which is not a new concept to replace Asian values propagated by Mahathir. Instead it is a new twist or expansion to the Asian values’ thesis where there are strong inputs on Islam and the Malay agenda. Abdullah has also never announced that he did not follow the concept of Asian values. Abdullah articulated his ideas of *Islam Hadhari* in his speech entitled ‘*Islam Hadhari* and the Malay Agenda’ at the UMNO General Assembly in September 2004 in Kuala Lumpur. He argued that *Islam Hadhari* is an approach of ‘progressive’ or ‘civilised’ Islam that emphasises on development, consistent with the tenets of Islam, and is focused on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve these through the mastery of knowledge and the development of the individual and the nation (Abdullah, 2006: 3). In addition, through the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system, it aims to achieve an integrated and balanced development that creates a knowledgeable and pious people who hold fast to noble value and are honest, trustworthy and prepared to take on global challenges. It also ensures that the government upholds the practice of good governance and accountability, and transparency to the people.

Abdullah (2006: 3) also explains that *Islam Hadhari* is not a new religion, a new teaching nor a new *mazhab* (denomination). It is an effort to bring the *ummah* (the worldwide community comprising all adherent of the Muslim faith) back to the basics of Islam, back to the fundamentals as prescribed in the *Quran* and the *hadith* which form the foundations for an Islamic civilisation. Therefore, *Islam Hadhari* aims to achieve 10 main principles:

1. Faith and piety in Allah;
2. A just and trustworthy government;
3. A free and independent people;
4. A vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge;
5. A balanced and comprehensive economic development;
6. A good quality of life for the people;

7. The protection of the rights of minority groups and women;
8. Cultural and moral integrity;
9. The safeguarding of natural resources and the environment; and
10. Strong defence capabilities.

In Parliamentary session on 27 August 2007, Abdullah reiterated that Malaysia was a Muslim country and governed by the Islamic principles. He said that Malaysia firmly believed in the principles of Parliamentary democracy guided by the country's highest law, the Federal Constitution (Bernama, 2007). Abdullah argued that the *Islam Hadhari* approach does not imply that Malaysia was a theocratic country. He explained that:

“The government that I lead is a government based on the principles of Parliamentary democracy and is answerable to Parliament. At the same time, the Cabinet comprises ministers who profess Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and others respectively, who reach consensus based on discussions and come out with the national development policies...I also dismiss the argument that it contravenes the social contract negotiated by our past leaders. We must remember that the Federal Constitution was successfully drafted on the basis of compromise and cooperation demonstrated by the three major races in the country when fighting for independence.” (Bernama, 2007: 1)

Abdullah said that this approach in administration has been practised by the Malaysian government for over 50 years, and the unique formula had been tested and its effectiveness had been proven. The adoption of Islamic principles in the country's administration did not in any way change the social contract or the constitution (Bernama, 2007).

*Islam Hadhari* is also viewed as a general framework for the development of the Muslim *ummah* away from the violent trend of *jihad*, extremism, and militaristic Islamic groups especially from al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. Malaysia had the experience with Islamic militant movements such as the al-Maunah and Kumpulan Mujahidin (Militan) Malaysia (KMM) who attempted *jihad* in 2002 and 2003. Abdullah openly criticised and disavowed the violent streak in the Islamic jihadist movement (Zainal, 2006: 180). Besides, *Islam Hadhari* is in intention to erase Islamophobia among the non-Muslims especially in Malaysia. Therefore, Abdullah encouraged dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in order to remove the stereotype of non-Muslims about violence in Muslim community.

Regarding democracy and free speech, Abdullah (2006: 114) believes that *Islam Hadhari* is entirely consistent with democracy, because *Islam Hadhari* is all about living peacefully and respecting each other in the society. *Islam Hadhari* encourages consensus building (*musyawarah*) as an approach to solving problems, and accepts the consultative process (*shura*) as the best way of dealing with various societal issues. Abdullah also urges people of goodwill, NGOs, and institutions of higher learning to all play a part in promoting critical dialogue between the non-Muslim world and the Muslim world. While it is necessary on their part to find a common ground with people of other faiths, Muslims must also open up the discourse within their own faith, a more open and diverse Islamic discourse. The observance of the canon of accountability in Islam was often matched by respect for the people's views. Morally upright Caliphs accommodated opinions that were different from theirs. In fact, there is a *hadith* that even eulogises the differences of opinion within the *ummah* as a sign of divine blessing. It explains why at different points in Muslim history, there were healthy discussions

and debates about religious and political matters among scholars and segments of the populace (Abdullah, 2006: 39).

### **Criticisms to *Islam hadhari***

There are many criticisms to the concept of *Islam Hadhari*. First, it is obvious that despite the idealistic argument of *Islam Hadhari*, it was definitely a politically astute strategy that succeeded in Islamising UMNO with the result of nullifying the attraction of 'PAS Islam', especially among the Malay peasants and new professionals. Abdullah made it a key point to assert the civilising function of religion in his formulation of a strategy to face the challenge of the 'Islamic state' by Parti Islam (PAS). According to Terence Chong (2006: 38), *Islam Hadhari* was a cause celebre in the run up to the March 2004 general election. Abdullah won by a landslide and *Islam Hadhari* was proclaimed a triumph by the on looking media.

Zainal (2006) argued that historically, *Islam Hadhari* was first proposed in 2001, before Abdullah became prime minister, by several Islamic thinkers within UMNO who grappled with the loss of 22 seats, the defeat of senior UMNO figures, and PAS' win of a state government (Terengganu) in the 1999 general election. A special information unit was formed within the Ministry of Information to combat the growing violent messages of Islam by various factions in society and messages against UMNO by members of PAS. Islamic programmes were launched to search for the most appropriate strategy and to reduce the damaging effect of the messages. By 2002, Abdullah, began to speak of *Islam Hadhari* as a general concept for Islamic development, in line with the thoughts of several renown world Islamic thinkers such as Yusuf Qardawi, Muhammad Amarah and Syeikh Mohamad al-Ghazali.<sup>1</sup>

Religious scholars in UMNO such as Ahmad Nakhaie and Abdullah Md. Zin, who also took part in the unit, were responsible to promote *Islam Hadhari* as a bastion of Islamic moderation and a model for development for other Muslim countries. Abdullah Md. Zin, a minister in the prime minister's department, said that when Muslims talk about Islam, "there is always the tendency to link it to the Prophet's time". Instead, *Islam Hadhari* gives equal emphasis to the present and the future. He further argued that "It emphasizes wisdom, practicality and harmony. It encourages moderation or a balanced approach to life. Yet it does not stray from the fundamentals of the Quran and the examples and sayings of the Prophet" (Sardar, 2004: 1). Thus, *Islam Hadhari* must follow strict guidelines of the shariah law practiced in the country. In fact, some religious officials have taken this policy to further the Islamisation of society. For instance in 2005, the Federal Territory Religious Department (Jawi) raided a nightclub where the Muslims at the club were asked to take breathalyzer tests and Muslim women were paraded before the officers to check whether they were decently dressed. The raid had sparked debate on the enforcement powers of religious officers and on the legitimacy of enforcing public morality (Osman, 2006: 1-4). Another case such as in August 2004 when the Mufti of Perak (the state's top Islamic official), issued a fatwa (religious edict), which proclaimed that the '*Sure Heboh*' open-air concerts (staged at different times in cities around the country) were '*haram*' (forbidden) under the Islamic shariah law. He claimed that the concerts were corrupting the Malay youths, fostering the intermingling of genders and encouraging Muslims to neglect their religious duties such as praying (Chin, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> These thinkers were regarded as the modern manifestation of earlier Islamic reformists such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Redha whose influence had made an impact on Islamic reformist movements in many Muslim states during the colonial period (Zainal, 2006: 181).

Second, Chong (2006: 38-39) argues that *Islam Hadhari*'s content continues to be heavy on rhetoric and light on meaning, even with the minister Abdullah Md. Zin's offering of '*wasatiyah* or a balanced approach to life'. While the details of *Islam Hadhari* remain vague, it is also traced to the teaching of Islamic philosopher, Ibn Khaldun. Its notion of 'progressiveness' is drawn from the adaptive mindset and practices whereby 'nomadic societies moved in a law-like manner from their tribal and primitive origins to a progressive civilisation'. Given the importance that Ibn Khaldun places on laws, social order, and its enforcement, it is not surprising that the state finds *Islam Hadhari* attractive.

Kessler (2008: 73) also argues that *Islam Hadhari* is woefully unexplained and unelaborated. It remains discursively underdeveloped and intellectually impoverished despite the great official investment in seminars, prime ministerial lectures worldwide, and ensuing books on the subject. Such an 'unpacking' of the term *Islam Hadhari* might provide the basis for, and so both unleash and give legitimacy to, a genuine modernist Islamic sensibility and politics. But this has not been attempted, not even this possibility has been officially glimpsed, in Malaysia (Kessler, 2008: 75). Instead of original creative thought in authentic, historically informed Islamic terms, all that is offered substantively is 'ten key values' of the utmost blandness, generality and unexceptional conventionality. All these talks about 'values' are the expression of a crippled, even defunct, sociology that is intellectually vacuous. It is secular, since it explains social reality in terms of supposedly determining values that are simply 'shorthand' summaries of the realities that they are invoked to explain. It is also politically impotent. As Malaysian experience shows, this approach cannot generate a new Islamic sensibility, an effective human agenda, an authentic and plausible politics, certainly not one to rival the Islamist dynamism of PAS. *Islam Hadhari* remains a failed challenge and a lost opportunity – if not a still-born child then an intellectual orphan. Yet it is only in such a genuinely civilisational understanding of Islam and by recognising the full implications of what *Islam Hadhari* might imply that the political impetus may be found to counter the ambitions of the encircling authoritarian Islamists (Kessler, 2008: 75-76).

Furthermore, Kamila (2006: 140) argues that on closer inspection to the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, it is little more than a repackaging of old ideas especially from Mahathir's '*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*' (Inculcation of Islamic Values and Anwar's '*Masyarakat Madani*' (Civil Society)<sup>2</sup>. Similarity with '*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*' is as the principles of *Islam Hadhari* are more or less a list of values prioritised by the government to be implemented in the society. Meanwhile, '*Masyarakat Madani*' is also argued as a concept propagating civilisational Islam, similar to the *Islam Hadhari*. It, however, remains unclear how the abstract principles of *Islam Hadhari* have been, or indeed can be, operationalised. The inability of the Malaysian government under Abdullah to make this abstract concept speaks to the everyday realities confronting the Malaysian people, particularly the non-Muslim minority, was made abundantly clear when *Islam Hadhari* was conspicuously absent in the government's explanation of how it would address a host of challenges such as the integrity of the judiciary, rising inflation, polarisation wrought by the deepening of Islamic conservatism and perceived encroachment on non-Muslim rights. In fact, by enunciating 'Belief in Allah' as its first principle, the concept of *Islam Hadhari* marks a discernible shift from the *Rukunegara*, which has as its first principle 'Belief in God'. In so doing, it has

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<sup>2</sup> Mahathir in mid 1980s oversaw the Islamisation of the Malaysian polity and bureaucracy, major facet of which was an initiative to construct an Islamic work ethic that could underpin the industrialisation of the country. Termed '*Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam*', this policy effectively formed the base for his developmental and modernisation strategies. A decade later, Anwar coined the term '*Masyarakat Madani*' to describe his own vision of Muslim governance in Malaysia, one that would be inclusive, just and democratic (Osman, Mahmood and Liow, 2008: 15).

inadvertently contributed to the escalation of the Islamisation discourse and further heightened the reservation of non-Muslims. Ultimately, for non-Muslim, *Islam Hadhari* has proven to be less about Islam or civilisation than it has been about the all-too-familiar refrain of Malay primacy. While lip service is paid to the protection of the 'rights of minority groups' by the champions of *Islam Hadhari*, the baggage of race had undoubtedly weighed it down (Osman, Mahmood and Liow, 2008: 16). This is evident when Abdullah pronounced in his 2004 UMNO General Assembly speech:

“*Islam Hadhari* is complete and comprehensive, with an emphasis on the development of the economy and civilisation, capable of building Malay competitiveness. The glorious heritage of the Islamic civilisation in all its aspects must be used as a reference in order to become the source of inspiration for the Malay race to prosper.” (Abdullah, 2006: 3)

Not only academicians who felt that *Islam Hadhari* is not a proper concept, Malaysian Muslim scholars also reckon that although *Islam Hadhari* has principles and values which are good for the society, many Malaysians still are confused and wrangle with the concept. For instance, an ex-Mufti (religious leader) of Malaysian state of Perlis, asserted that after four years the concept being introduced, the government was still working hard to explain to the people about the ambiguous concept. Many questions as to why the government needs to introduce the new concept of *Islam Hadhari*, and some even think that this is a new sect created by UMNO. The ex-Mufti personally agrees for the word 'Islam' in the concept to be replaced to other words such as '*Pemikiran*' *Hadhari* (*Hadhari* Thought) or '*Gerakan*' *Hadhari* (*Hadhari* Movement). According to him, it is improper to use the word 'Islam' as label because the word could create misunderstanding to the people. He sees so far *Islam Hadhari* is just a brand with no product because people do not understand the contents of the concept. What people want is not the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, argued the ex-Mufti, instead they want a clean and transparent government from corruption and abuse of power, plus serving for the interests of the people (Yani, 2008: 41-42).

Third, critics argue that *Islam Hadhari* was propagated to define the UMNO's version of Islam. Anwar Ibrahim accused the government of appealing to puritanical Muslim sentiment to reinforce support ahead of the vote previously in the 11<sup>th</sup> general election and then in the 12<sup>th</sup> general election. Commentators in multiracial but Muslim majority Malaysia have sounded alarm over the growing 'Islamisation' of the country and the increasing polarisation of the three main ethnic communities. Anwar argued that Malaysia's problem is not radicalism but the issue of state-sponsored Muslim Puritanism which is more by racist sentiments than religious principles. Anwar said that 'for some reason it is the belief of the present administration in Kuala Lumpur that playing the puritanical card would be best bet for the UMNO-dominated ruling coalition to secure electoral success in the coming (2008) election...By holding themselves out to be the staunchest defender of Islam, UMNO hopes to garner greater support' (AFP, 2008: 1).

Meanwhile, PAS attacks the concept as *bid'ah*, revisionism of Islamic tenets and injunctions – and highlighted the failure of the concept to relate the foundation of Islam to the *shariah* law and its necessity in an Islamic state (Zainal, 2006: 181). PAS' President Abdul Hadi Awang accused the then prime minister Abdullah of being 'inauthentic' (Chong, 2006: 39). A roadshow was undertaken among its members to spread the message that *Islam Hadhari* was unlawful under Islamic *shariah* law, a new Islam departing from the truth (Zainal, 2006: 181).

### ***Islam hadhari and Asian values: are they compatible?***

Abdullah explained very little about the compatibility between democracy and *Islam Hadhari*. Although, Abdullah suggested that *Islam Hadhari* will encourage critical debates especially in resolving the Muslim issues locally as well as globally, the implementation remained to be seen. Many laws pertaining to restrict human rights still continue to exist and be applied. With many criticisms of the concept of *Islam Hadhari*, clearly it does not contribute credential to be a new idea in guiding the Malaysian politics, instead it is a mask of same agenda as 'Asian values' propagated by Mahathir. Abdullah also propagates the cultural factor by mentioning about the importance of culture to Malaysian people especially the Malays. For instance, Abdullah argues that in order for the Malays to reach greatness and progress in development and economy, they have to go back and embrace their traditional cultures and values by saying that:

“The Malays have to be reminded to return to the noble values that are a part of their culture, a culture that has produced our strength and built our civilisation. Enrich the Malay race with knowledge so that Malays will become a wiser people. The Malays are an industrious people. The Malays know that comfort does not come easy, and that wealth must be earned. We are a people that realise how important it is to be vigilant to ensure our survival; we are aware of how important it is to be prepared to face any eventuality. But when there are Malays who are inclined towards adopting negative values, then the Malay race is in grave danger. Then we will have Malays who would sacrifice substance for style, Malays who will betray their own kind in the name of short-term gain.” (Abdullah, 2006: 20)

Abdullah believes that the Malays, UMNO and Islam in this country cannot be separated where together the three elements form a distinct culture and identity. However, this statement does arguably not reflect the reality of UMNO memberships where it also accepts people from Siamese-Buddhist origin as members even though the majority of memberships are Malay-Muslims.

With regard to Malaysian multiracial society, Abdullah stresses that the young Malaysians must be taught to believe in God, to be of good morally upright character, to uphold family values and to be confident and patriotic (Abdullah, 2006: 28). Abdullah, as well as Mahathir, prioritises national stability and economic rights than civil and political liberties. By referring to political opposition, he argues that:

“We are a democratic country. We value the people’s right to choose and elect government they want. There are no grounds for anyone or any group to act beyond this democratic process or outside the confines of the country’s laws....Much of our agenda to develop our people and our nation lies before us. We will continue to work together with the people to bring further development. We will bring full force of the law against anyone or any group that tries to obstruct us from fulfilling this development agenda through violence and rioting.” (Abdullah, 2006: 25)

Thus, people of many faiths live in peace and harmony with mutual respect and tolerance towards each other. In achieving that, Abdullah maintains deliberate and sensible management of race relations through power sharing and managing economic growth and equitable distribution of wealth and benefits. Abdullah also wants to preserve the BN democratic style

of consensus or consociation politics in decision-making process. According to Zainal (2006: 186-187), Barisan Nasional (BN) is always very cautiously and principally using a consultative and circumspect bargaining method to reach a common decision. Abdullah would make the final decision on certain issues related to any particular ethnic groups after an open debate and information-sharing. Abdullah revealed that:

“All have the right to speak, even if the issue involves matters related to specific races or specific religions. In the BN style, we are confident that we can discuss all issues, even if they involved sensitive topics, in a wise manner and come to a consensus. The key to this is that we must engage in discussion in an attitude of moderation.” (New Sunday Times, 2004: 1)

The current Prime Minister, Najib Razak explains, ‘We remain as one nation not because of the need to meet the constitutional requirements, but because we are able to reach political consensus under the BN’ (New Straits Times, 2008: 4). BN makes decisions on the basis of mutual agreement, not majorities where the small parties had the same rights and voice as the big parties in the BN. The traditional BN-UMNO coalition has continued with the understanding that each and every political party in this coalition will represent the interest of their racial group within the government. Abdullah did not seem to have made any radical changes to the nature of the relationship or the process of decision-making. The enlargement in the number of Parliamentary seats and state legislative assemblies for the previous general election, including in the 2008 general election, have been allocated to all parties within the confines of the general principles and the outcome generally has been accepted by all concerned (Zainal, 2006: 187).

Moreover, like Mahathir, Abdullah (2006: 47) is also critical to the Western values of individualism and the West for not doing much in resolving the issues of terrorism and Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. He urges the West to learn about Muslim world because in his view Muslims see themselves as a collective *ummah*, notwithstanding the occasional disunity among Muslim countries. Unlike Western individualism, Muslims have a strong sense of fraternity as a community of believers. This means empathy to Muslims who are not affected by poverty or who have nothing to do with Palestine feel so strongly about the issue. Abdullah argues that this is why without addressing and identifying the root causes of terrorism the war against terror will not succeed. Islam and the Muslims continue to be portrayed as ‘violent’, ‘extreme’ and ‘intolerant’. In the post-11 September 2001, Western world has perpetuated a negative Muslim stereotype, well-documented for all to see especially by the Western media. Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West. To their credit, some Western leaders have repeatedly stressed that ‘this is not a war against Islam’. But this appears trivial when popular sentiment is driven by a sensationalist seeking Western media that focuses almost exclusively on extremist discourse. Abdullah (2006: 55-56) hopes that there is a willingness on the part of the West to demonstrate that their policies can change accordingly and try to rectify the erroneous stereotype of the Muslims portrayed by the Western media.

Finally, one of the important characteristics of Asian values is neo-feudalism. Although Abdullah did not so much reveal himself as autocratic or feudalistic leader, his position and several of his decisions were in line with the neo-feudal approach. First, Abdullah lead a neo-feudal institution, the UMNO, which struggles to uphold the concept of ‘*Ketuanan Melayu*’ (Malay supremacy). This concept defends the right of Malays to rule the country which makes the non-Malays felt that they are second class citizens. Abdullah said that:



“I understand the apprehension of the *Bumiputeras*. I strongly uphold the objectives behind the formation of UMNO. UMNO was formed to fight for the right of the Malays. I strongly uphold the nationalist agenda of the Malays. It is important that we think critically and develop strategies to face global challenges. UMNO must not allow the Malays to be defeatists; we must not allow the Malays to believe that they are fated to be weak in perpetuity.” (Abdullah, 2006: 18)

During the UMNO general assembly in December 2006, there was a serious disconnection between Abdullah and members of UMNO. When opening the party’s annual meeting, Abdullah urged his party members to tone down on the rhetoric of race and religion, two extremely sensitive issues in multiracial Malaysia. However, in successive speeches by delegates at the general assembly which, race and religion have featured prominently in shrill tones, stirring unease among locals and foreigners. Some delegates railed against critics of the special privileges accorded to Malays and Islam’s place as the country’s official religion. One of them even said that ‘UMNO is willing to risk lives and bathe in blood to defend the race and religion. Don’t play with fire. If they messed with our rights, we will mess with theirs.’ (Lopez, 2006: 1). The DAP, which had been a vocal opponent of the ISA, filed a police report against UMNO, whose annual general assembly had been noted for its heated rhetoric (Lopez, 2006). After the assembly, in response to public unhappiness, especially Chinese, Indians and other non-Malays, with speakers who touched on racial and religious issues, Abdullah reminded everyone that race and religious issues are still very sensitive matters. Whether any of the statements were seditious would no doubt depend on what was actually said and the effect of those words (Singh, 2006).

Furthermore, Abdullah, in his speech at the November 2007 UMNO General Assembly, defended his UMNO Youth Chief action of *keris*-waving in the 2006 General Assembly which received criticisms and was considered by many non-Malays a racist gesture. Instead Abdullah blamed the critics as wishing to inflame communal sentiments and sensationalise the words and acts of a few UMNO leaders and speakers. He argued that the act of unsheathing and kissing a *keris*, which was seen by many including the Malays as an act for war (Lee, 2008), is part of Malay cultural heritage and the act has been twisted to spread fear among non-Malays in order to smear the image of UMNO (The Star Online, 2007). The photo of the *keris*-waving had been circulated to the non-Malays especially Chinese and Indians during the 2008 general election, and managed to upset the non-Malays to vote the opposition. Many argue that UMNO Youth chief Hishammuddin Hussein failed to understand that raising a weapon (even a sheathed one) creates an aggressor’s image. He was unaware that the *keris* is an instrument of violence for the non-Malays (Malaysiakini, 2005). Hishammuddin later apologised to the non-Malays soon after the 2008 general election ended. He realised that his action had insulted non-Malays and was used by the opposition to scare the non-Malays about Malay chauvinistic behaviour of UMNO leaders.

Similar to the above is in the case of ex-Bukit Bendera UMNO division chief, who was suspended by UMNO supreme council for three years after pressures, of leaving the BN, from other BN component parties such as Gerakan and MCA. The decision was made under Clause 20.9 of the party constitution, which bars a member from contesting or holding any position in the party, because the ex-division chief referred Malaysian Chinese as ‘squatters’ in a public gathering during the Permatang Pauh by-election in August 2008 (Vasudevan, Ng and Sajahan, 2008: 2). The remarks clearly angered the Chinese and gave negative perception of multiracial society and race relations in Malaysia.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, there are similarities between the concepts of Asian values and *Islam Hadhari* even though both were propagated by different prime ministers of Malaysia, the former by Mahathir and the latter by Abdullah. Asian values more or less tried to promote and strengthen the Malay values which were based on Islam. *Islam Hadhari*, similarly, attempted to blend Islam with tradition Malay values. Therefore, both concepts were not actually dissimilar, except for their names or concepts. However, both are considered as concepts that purposely utilised to retain UMNO's agenda of neo-feudalism and ensured it to stay in power and protect Malay rights. Even some especially from the opposition claimed that both concepts were used to manipulate the Malay values and Islam in justifying autocratic rules by both leaders, Mahathir and Abdullah. What is clear is that both concepts have had significant impacts toward Malaysian society. However, since April 2009, Abdullah has retired and Najib Tun Razak, his deputy, has replaced him as the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia. Najib has propagated the idea of '1 Malaysia'. To what extent the current concept of '1 Malaysia' propagated by the current Prime Minister would impact the society would be an interesting issue for intellectual discourse. In my view, the idea would not go far from the main principles advocated by the UMNO and its previous and current leaders.

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